

LINCOLN— LOVER OF CHILDREN

Address of

Hon. George A. Dondero
of Michigan

in the

House of Representatives

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To Allen G. Knight
also a lover of Lincoln
Geo. A. Dondero

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ADDRESS

OF

HON. GEORGE A. DONDERO

Mr. DONDERO. Mr. Speaker, the friendly act of the gentleman from New York [Mr. SNELL] in asking unanimous consent in my behalf to address the House, and the generous act of the Speaker and the House in granting that request, is sincerely appreciated by me, a new Member of this body.

Sometimes the Great Ruler of the universe places greatness in strange surroundings, but no one would ever have looked for it in the crude shelter of a pioneer in the backwoods of Kentucky, a century and 25 years ago today.

Wherever in this world liberty and justice, mercy and kindness, truth and rugged honesty are known and understood by the people, there also is known and understood the name and character of Abraham Lincoln.

Therefore it is fitting and proper that this day should not pass without due recognition of its national significance, for throughout the length and breadth of the land the people today are commemorating the noble attributes of a noble man.

It is right for us, here in this House of Commons of the American people, to pause in our legislative duties to the Nation and remember the natal day of the most uncommon commoner of our history.

In philosophy, in art, and in religion, as in all progress, the final objective is simplicity.

Abraham Lincoln, not of Kentucky, not of Illinois, not of our Republic, but of the world, was the earthly incarnation of that sublime virtue.

He had a simplicity that was sincere. He had the faith and the wisdom, the truth and the forgiveness of a child.

In that matchless volume of Hebrew literature—the Bible—we are told that:

The wolf shall dwell with the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid, and the calf and the young lion and the fatling together; and a little child shall lead them. (Isaiah 11: 6.)

To be a lover of children and be loved by children is truly a personal distinction. Through the ministry of children we are led away from the hard preplexing problems of life, and we become devoted to their sweet simplicity from which

we derive rest and comforting assurance. Without guile they come to us fresh from God. May it be a long, long time before we, who are only children of a larger growth, drift away from the virtues of childhood.

That Abraham Lincoln loved little children is known. That he was a kind and indulgent father to his four boys is also known. That he was respected and esteemed by the little children in his neighborhood who knew him in Springfield, Ill., is equally true.

When death robbed him of a second son at the White House in this city of Washington, his mighty heart broke and thereafter his paternal affection seemed to center in little Tad, the only boy he had left at home. There was no little girl in the Lincoln home.

Denied a daughter of his own, he was especially fond of little girls and was moved to tenderness by their laughter and appeals.

This trait of his character reveals that his emotions and his heart were not unlike those of the lowly Carpenter whose very being was enthroned in childhood.

He could carry on his back to the depot the trunk of little Josephine Reman, of Springfield, when the drayman forgot she was going away on a train.

When Congressman Dawes called at the old Willard Hotel to pay his respects to the new President, it was his daughter Anna, age 10, who became the center of the President's interest and affection—taking her into his arms as a father.

When Julia Taft, barely in her teens, called with her parents to wish him well, he asked her to come often to the White House—and she did—where she became the playmate of his children and the sunshine of his soul.

From the lips of LaSalle Pickett, whom I knew well, widow of the Confederate general who led the immortal charge at Gettysburg, I heard the story, how on the 4th day of April 1865, in the city of Richmond, Va., a tall bearded man dressed in black knocked at her door, not as the President of the United States he said, but "as George Pickett's old friend." He called to see the old Virginia home as described to him by George Pickett years before when they met in Quincy, Ill. She answered the knock with a baby in her arms, which by some strange intuition stretched out its little hands to him. Taking the precious babe into his giant arms, he cuddled him close to his breast, kissed him, and handing the child back to its mother, said, "Tell George I forgive him for the little fellow's sake."

So it is not strange that 11 days later when a great life went out at 516 Tenth Street, in this Capital City of the Nation, General Pickett would telegraph to his wife from the battlefield, "My God, the South has lost her best friend."

Incidentally, may I say that, in the tall, beardless lawyer from Illinois, young George Pickett had confided the secret

years before that when he tried to concentrate his thought and attention on the printed page of a law book in his uncle's office at Quincy, he was dreaming of bugle calls and drum beats in the Army. It was Lincoln who aided Pickett to gain entrance to West Point.

On a day in October 1860, less than 3 weeks before his election as President of the United States, a strange and unusual letter came to his desk in a little room provided for his convenience in the old statehouse at Springfield. It was written by a little girl 11 years of age in Westfield, Chautauqua County, N.Y. It brought him a suggestion and some advice intended to aid him in his campaign for election.

What that letter contained has never been known except what we might assume from the answer which Mr. Lincoln made to his little friend.

It told him in unmistakable language that he would be a better-looking man if he would let his whiskers grow, and if he was too busy to answer her letter he might have his little girl do it. Not one of his campaign managers, no governor, no Senator of the United States; why, not even a Congressman had ever told him he would be a better-looking man if he would let his whiskers grow; but when that idea was suggested to him from the depths of a child's heart, he took it seriously and acted upon it. From the very day that he received her letter he decided he would wear a beard.

A candidate for the office of President of the United States 20 days before election is a busy man, and Abraham Lincoln was no exception. We may be sure that the bitterness of the campaign of 1860 produced an immense quantity of mail. Shorthand, stenographers, and typewriters were unknown to him. All letters had to be written in longhand and with a pen. He had to employ a secretary and assistant secretaries to attend to his correspondence.

Deeply absorbed in his campaign and its problems, nevertheless he was not too busy to answer that little girl's letter in his own handwriting, marking it "private."

All portraits of Mr. Lincoln up to the time of his election show him beardless. The people of the United States from the beginning of the Government had never seen a bearded President.

Had Abraham Lincoln taken any other train on any other railroad, the following part of this story could not be told. On his way to Washington to become the President his train stopped at Westfield, N.Y., February 16, 1861, where his little adviser lived. Addressing the crowd, who had come to see and hear the President, he told them he had a letter from a little girl in that place, naming her, and if she were present to please come forward. As she did so, he stooped down, shook her hand, and in the presence of the people, kissed her, saying, "You see, Grace, I let these whiskers grow for you", and pointed to his full-grown beard.

The writing of the letter by Grace Bedell, with its unique advice, conceived and executed in her own mind without the knowledge of her parents, was a strange act. That Mr. Lincoln answered her letter at once is stranger still. That he took her advice and let his beard grow is still more strange; that he made a public acknowledgement of it adds another strange fact to a strange story. The strangest part of this unusual story is a fact which has remained unknown for more than 70 years—the span of man's life upon the earth—and that is that out of the unnumbered thousands of letters which he surely received during his presidential campaign, he preserved little Grace Bedell's letter until his death. The letter found a home and was preserved in the White House during the four tear-drenched years of the Civil War. Through the years it has lain hidden from the world, the treasured possession of the Lincoln family. From the hand of Mrs. Robert Todd Lincoln, he who relates this story received that letter to be returned to Grace Bedell, who wrote it, and through her generous act it has become my sacred possession.

I give its contents.

WESTFIELD, CHAUTAUQUA Co., N.Y.,
Oct. 15, 1860.

Hon. A. B. LINCOLN.

DEAR SIR: My father has just home from the fair and brought home your picture and Mr. Hamlin's. I am a little girl only eleven years old, but want you should be President of the United States very much so I hope you wont think me very bold to write to such a great man as you are. Have you any little girls about as large as I am, if so give them my love and tell her to write me, if you cannot answer this letter. I have got 4 brothers and part of them will vote for you any way and if you will let your whiskers grow I will try and get the rest of them to vote for you, you would look a great deal better for your face is so thin. All the ladies like whiskers and they would tease their husbands to vote for you and then you would be President. My father is a going to vote for you and if I was a man I would vote for you to but I will try and get every one to vote for you that I can. I think that rail fence around your picture makes it look very pretty. I have got a little baby sister she is nine weeks old and is just as cunning as can be. When you direct your letter direct to Grace Bedell, Westfield, Chautauqua County, New York. I must not write any more. Answer this letter right off.

Good bye,

GRACE BEDELL.

And Abraham Lincoln answered "right off" and said:

Private.

SPRINGFIELD, ILL., October 19, 1860.

MISS GRACE BEDELL.

MY DEAR LITTLE MISS: Your very agreeable letter of the 15th is received. I regret the necessity of saying I have no daughter. I have three sons—one 17, one 9, and one 7 years of age. They, with their mother, constitute my whole family.

As to the whiskers, having never worn any, do you not think people would call it a piece of silly affection if I were to begin it now?

Your very sincere well wisher,

A. LINCOLN.

The speed and promptness of the mail service of that far-off day—1860—nearly three quarters of a century ago, is somewhat surprising to us who live in this day of fast express trains and air mail service, when we consider that the little girl mailed her letter October 15, 1860, at Westfield, N.Y., it had traveled 600 miles to Springfield, Ill., and Mr. Lincoln had received, opened, read, and answered "right off" by October 19, all within the space of 4 days.

Grace Bedell Billings is still numbered with the living. Her temples, like those of our distinguished Speaker, have been silvered by the snows of many winters. She still has and prizes the letter Mr. Lincoln wrote to her. It hangs framed on the walls of her modest home. Several blotches appear on the face of the letter, and one might easily assume that they were caused by Mr. Lincoln folding the letter before the ink became dry. This is not the fact. Grace Bedell told me that in her excitement upon receiving the letter from Mr. Lincoln she ran out of the post office at Westfield, N.Y., with the letter opened in her hand. An early autumn snow was falling, and those blotches represent the only known traces in the world of the snowflakes of 1860. She resides at Delphos, Kans., and is a constituent of our colleague the gentlewoman from Kansas [Mrs. McCARTHY].

Perhaps this is as strange a story as can truthfully be related of any President, or Presidential candidate, in the history of the United States, that Abraham Lincoln consented to so radical a change in his personal appearance at the suggestion of a little girl.

We may wonder whether or not in the dark days that followed his inauguration as President and the breaking out of the War between the States he might have smiled as he stroked his beard at the memory of a child's advice. He wore his beard in death. The multitudes who revere the memory of Abraham Lincoln and reflect upon his personal appearance are greatly indebted to little Grace Bedell, for she is responsible for the first bearded President in the history of the United States.

May we of this House of Representatives, in which he once served the Nation from 1847 to 1849, believe today that somewhere "in the infinite meadows of heaven, where blossom the stars", Abraham Lincoln is still loving little children, still loved by little children, and led by them into the everlasting dimensions of his undying manhood.

Lincoln, great treasure of our Republic, and one of the gentlest memories of our world.

[Applause.]

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